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JAMES STEWART
TELLS HIS OWN STORY

Indiana's Delinquent City

In shabby Terre Haute, progress is dead, vice flourishes, and the citizens don't seem to care. A *Post* editor reports on the decline of an American city.

By PETER WYDEN

Downtown Terre Haute. This building was partially destroyed when a brewery company abandoned it in August, 1959. It still stands, a reminder of the general apathy toward improvement and the stagnant state of industry.

I had spent less than a day in Terre Haute, Indiana, when it became apparent to me that the town was—well, let's say unusual. In a decorous little night club on the main street, which is also U. S. Highway 40, I watched customers straining in concentration over a whirling roulette wheel. Farther downtown I climbed a short flight of steps right into a booming bookie joint. At other stops utterly respectable citizens assured me that there weren't "over a dozen" brothels operating any more. They were convinced that Terre Haute (pop. 71,851), the somber, tranquil-appearing seat of Vigo County, near the Illinois state line, really was a fine city—except for just a few flaws.

These citizens called the local newspapers "our daily tranquilizers," and complained that the town has no sewage-disposal plant, no civic auditorium, no public swimming pool and no effective two-party system in local government. Unemployment is chronic. On weekday mornings the offices of the mayor and the county commissioners are besieged by men hoping for a day's work. Except for one year during World War II, Terre Haute has been a "labor-surplus area," and often a critical one, ever since the town stopped growing back

A game of "Twenty-One" at the Pine Ranch club in Terre Haute. This photograph was taken last month.

Federal agents smashed an international gambling syndicate in this room on November 29, 1957. In the background, beyond the odds sheet, a T-man (wearing jacket) questions Indianapolis gambler Joey Jacobs.

The Club Idaho, a remodeled movie theater on Hulman Street. In addition to delicious food and a floor show, it offers roulette and other gambling games in its rebuilt projection room and upstairs office.

A bookie parlor operated behind painted windows above this restaurant at Ninth Street and Wabash Avenue when the author visited it.

in 1919. Disastrous floods have plagued the area even longer. Paul Dresser, a native song writer who became famous, wrote nostalgically of the moonlight "on the banks of the Wabash, far away." Unhappily, the Wabash not infrequently overflows its banks and inundates the countryside.

High water, unemployment—these are hardships which can be met; other cities have done so. But what can be done for a city enfeebled by apathy? What is the cure for poverty of spirit? Terre Haute is a sharp reminder of recent warnings uttered by many distinguished Americans. In effect, our leading citizens have said we must think hard and work hard to achieve our national goals. But Terre Haute, it appears, never got the message.

Bluntly speaking, folks there don't give a hoot. Other towns in Indiana, and elsewhere, too, have their headaches. But other Indiana communities are making progress—Indianapolis, for example, Fort Wayne, Kokomo. Some of Terre Haute's residents suspect that their city is "different," but they can't understand why. And few seem interested in making changes.

When I discussed gambling, for example, with Ralph Tucker, the four-time Democratic mayor, he said it was confined to "private clubs." He compared their operation to "a woman walking around in the nude in her home without the shade drawn. You could arrest her for indecency, I suppose."

Recalling that Terre Haute is known elsewhere in Indiana as "Hulmansville," I then inquired of its richest man, Anton (Tony) Hulman Jr., what he thought of his home town's future. "I feel the city will eventually make progress," he said. "When, I don't know. And again I may be mistaken."

When I asked John K. Lamb, the executive vice president of the (Continued on Page 63)

"The people just don't care," says John Lamb, executive vice president of the Chamber of Commerce.

Left: Millionaire Tony Hulman Jr. owns more Terre Haute real estate than anyone else and controls much of the town's business.

Four-time Mayor Ralph Tucker. "I believe in the spoils system," he says. "If there is any job a Democrat can't hold, I favor abolishing it."

Attorney Floyd Dix, chairman of the Civic Development Committee, blasted Terre Haute's indifferent citizens on TV two years ago—but they remained indifferent.

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Chamber of Commerce, what ails his city, he said, "It's purely a matter of civic conscience, which we do not have. People just don't care. We've offered them something good, and they evidently don't want it."

Something good in the way of plans to uplift the city has been offered the taxpayers on many occasions since their chief industry, coal mining, began faltering after World War I. But except for one four-year stretch of reform government during the '40's, most good things in Terre Haute seem to have fallen into the lap of Tony Hulman.

Today—either directly, or through his family-owned Hulman Foundation, or his parent company, Hulman and Company (wholesale grocers, furniture and hardware merchants and manufacturers of Clabber Girl baking powder)—he owns all or substantial chunks of the following: both Terre Haute newspapers; the only television station; the leading hotel; the leading plumbing-supply house; the biggest bank, which was recently victimized by an embezzlement scheme; a coke-manufacturing firm; a truck line; the local gas company; the long-distance bus terminal; the first and biggest shopping center; and Hulman Meadows, the largest and choicest suburban subdivision. Additional real-estate holdings make him the largest individual owner of downtown property.

Beyond his immediate domain, he owns controlling interests in the gas company of Richmond, Indiana; the Hulman Building, which is the largest office building in Evansville, Indiana; the Hulman Building in Dayton, Ohio, which is the biggest there; the Indianapolis Speedway, which Tony operates personally and pretty much as a hobby. His wife, Mary, is an heiress of the La Fendrich cigar-manufacturing empire of Evansville. Tony inherited his wholesale grocery business, but acquired many of his other holdings in recent years.

"We've been gettin' along," he said.

If Hulman were a frenetic exploiter or a ruthless juggler of financial superstructures, the mystery of Terre Haute's civic languor might be explained more readily. But it is impossible to visualize Hulman as the villain. He is universally liked, and it is easy to see why. Smiling, courtly and open-faced, he works in an office as cluttered as an old country general store. Painfully shy with strangers, he was distressed because I failed to yield at once to his request to call him "Tony."

"He's a common-shoe type of fellow," Mayor Tucker told me. "When I see him I feel like giving him a coupla bucks for a haircut. The only fault I find with him—when I talk to him about something in the community—is I talk to him for half an hour, and I come back to the office and wonder: What did he say?"

No one claims that Hulman is a simpleton or a figurehead. He was graduated from Yale, and his grades were good. His class of 1924 voted him the second-best athlete, third "best-looking" and fifth "most popular." For three years he was the lightest man on the football squad, yet he won Walter Camp's All-American honorable mention. When a combined Yale-Harvard track team competed against Oxford in Cambridge, England, Tony took the high-hurdle race.

Tanned and trim at fifty-nine, he still cherishes sports as his chief enthusiasm. He owns a yacht that once belonged to Lammot du Pont, and a few years ago he was captain of the United States tuna-fishing team. Nothing has given him greater satisfaction than the acquisition of the Indianapolis Speedway, which he bought in 1945 for about $750,000, when it was badly run down. Since then he has poured considerably more than the purchase price into improvements. The track pays for itself, but its psychic dividends are far more significant to Tony. The high point of his year is the moment on Memorial Day when he shouts, "Gentlemen, start your engines!" and sets off in the pace car to start the "500" classic.

Yet Tony is no playboy. When the family business slowed during the depression, it was he who capitalized on the revival of home baking in rural areas by promoting his own Clabber Girl baking powder, and turning it into a big seller. Surrounded by shrewd advisers, commonly called the "palace guard" around Terre Haute, he nevertheless tends his enterprises personally and makes major decisions with a country storekeeper's eye for bargains.

Tony is fond of Terre Haute. It saddens him to hear the city criticized, and he regards its unfortunate regional reputation as exaggerated. "I don't feel it's any different from any other community in this part of the country," he said. For six years, until 1950, he was president of the Chamber of Commerce; his lieutenants held the office for eight years more. He served on committees to attract new industry. He made it possible to build Hulman airport by donating $200,000 for the land. Now he is thinking of handing out more than $1,000,000 to build an auditorium.

For nearly a decade, however, he has displayed less and less interest in being a civic leader. He is rarely seen around town, even at parties. Townsmen view his withdrawal as an enigma. "I've yet to meet a man who understands Tony," said one of the city's canniest businessmen. And in a city as troubled as Terre Haute, with so many economic strings leading into Hulman's musty office, attempts to understand Tony never end.

The causes of Terre Haute's decline, as we shall see, reach deep into its ripping past. But as Hulman became increasingly wealthy by selling the citizenry such common needs as plumbing, newspapers and cooking gas, the existing lethargy was compounded by a spirit of "let Tony do it." People took to blaming Hulman for everything that went awry. When the bus company was in trouble, straphangers said Tony ought to get moving and provide proper service. It happens that Tony has nothing to do with local public transit, but since he seems to have a hand in everything, it was not unnatural for people to assume that he owns the buses too.

It also happens that Tony is a sensitive fellow. "He isn't too much at throwing his weight around," said Joe Cloutier, Hulman's tight-lipped vice president, treasurer and closest associate. "He doesn't want to do anything to hurt anyone's feelings." Another friend said, "He doesn't like to argue. If there's any kind of an argument, he wants no part of it." This may help explain why Hulman never enters into the editorial management of his newspapers. Or why he will not disclose his party affiliation—"I've never really called myself anything." Or why he now keeps his distance from the Chamber of Commerce and its efforts.

For in the chamber there has been argument aplenty. It began shortly after 1952 when John Lamb became its operating head. Lamb, a lean, tense six-footer of fifty-eight, was one of Hulman's childhood chums. The men still like each other. But just as Tony is no ordinary tycoon, Lamb is no standard Chamber of Commerce man. A former fire captain and county civil-defense director, he took the $6000-a-year job because there were few applicants and he felt that something had to be done for Terre Haute.

He started with the chamber. Its office was not air-conditioned, and its upstairs location was hard to find. Its activities were unimpressive. So was its record for civic energy. Whoever contributed the most money cast the most votes. This gave the Hulman interests twice as much say as anyone else.

Lamb called in an out-of-town efficiency expert. The consultant's report was a model of diplomatic but devastating criticism of just about everything connected with the chamber, including Lamb. "He works too hard, handles too many details, worries about the community problems and does not release his concerns at the end of the day's work," it said.

Lamb has not changed, but the chamber has. It is run from modern new quarters and in a new let's-do-something atmosphere. A major reorganization reduced votes to one per member, regardless of affluence, and there have been no more presidents out of the Hulman stable since 1958. Everybody, including Tony, recognized these efforts as an anti-Hulman revolt. Tony was understandably hurt.

"Come out from under that hay."

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Next, Lamb introduced a policy of brutal candor. The chamber employed a team of planners from the University of Illinois. They surveyed the deterioration and traffic jams downtown and reported the situation "desperate." Lamb published their report and suggestions. He also put out a broadside of his own and zeroed in right on the main street:

"We challenge anyone to walk down Wabash Avenue from Third to Ninth streets, taking an inventory of the ancient, dilapidated buildings; antiquated store fronts; vacant upper floors; unpainted, unwashed, unclean exterior walls; garish, dirty streets; overhanging signs and traffic jams, without realizing that something needs to be done—and quickly. Downtown Terre Haute . . . hasn't had a face lifting, or even a face washing, in decades. We conclude that it is not lack of knowledge that has brought this about—it is lack of will, initiative, co-operation and leadership."

New leadership sprang up in the person of small, wiry Floyd Dix, sixty-five, a leading local attorney. As head of the chamber's civic-development committee, Dix was given TV time. He made three talks, and what he said should have sparked, as one company president put it, "pitched battles in the streets."

Most Indiana cities, Dix pointed out, had grown by 50 per cent or more since 1920. Terre Haute actually lost population between 1920 and 1950. If it had not annexed a neighboring township, it would have lost more since. Then Dix asked some questions:

"Why do we have to be among the last to get on the band wagon of urban renewal? Why do we have no underpasses at our key railroad crossings? Why did 20,000 of our 36,000 registered voters in the city stay away from the polls last May fifth? Why have we been so long in getting started on an adequate sewer system? Why do we have one of the highest tax rates in the state and so little to show for it? Why no enforcement of our smoke-abatement ordinance? Why do our young people leave this city?"

The seriousness of the exodus of the young from Terre Haute had been brought home to Dix, he said, when he and other local lawyers had talked with Federal Social Security authorities. "We asked them why the per-capita cost of Social Security in Vigo County was so high. They told us that it was because we had so many old people in proportion to our total population. Isn't that lovely?"

What to do? "I'm not sure what can be accomplished in Terre Haute," Dix said, "but I'll tell you what other cities have found out—that it takes an aroused citizenry. This type of movement in other cities has only come about where the people realized that their old home town was going to pot, and that they jolly well better do something about it."

Since Dix went on television almost two years ago, not much has happened in Terre Haute except that some Wabash Avenue store fronts were rebuilt or

cleaned up. Also, Mayor Tucker was re-elected.

Born in the nearby coal-mining town of Hymera, the mayor, now fifty-two, was one of eight children. He was reared by a sister. His father was dead, his mother was a cook in a restaurant—"There was no pension plans, there was no nothin'." He worked his way through high school as a waiter and dishwasher, then sold lumber, became a radio announcer—"I was the original 'man on the street'"—and organized door-to-door magazine-selling crews. He ran successfully for city clerk and was elected mayor in 1947.

In 1956 Tucker, a smooth-mannered, free-flowing orator who commands a fine range of public emotion, benefited from a row within the Democratic Party and became the first citizen of Terre Haute to win the gubernatorial nomination. His slogan was, "It's time for Tucker." The electorate disagreed. He was defeated but not before he uttered one well-remembered statement. As the Indianapolis *Star* reported it, he told a rally, "I was raised on organization politics. I am a spoils-system officeholder. I practice the spoils system. I believe that to the victor belong the spoils. If there is any job a Democrat can't hold, I favor abolishing it."

When Adlai Stevenson spoke in Indianapolis, he was so shocked at this that Tucker was the only local candidate on the platform with him who remained unmentioned by the Presidential nominee. In Terre Haute, however, the mayor's star shone on. "I attribute my success more or less to a flair, I guess, to wanting to accomplish something every day," he told me at his U-shaped City Hall desk, with a copy of the Bible and a color picture of Jesus in prominent display. "I believe you don't have to be a mental giant to be a success—just know right from wrong and practice it."

The mayor attributed Terre Haute's reputation to attempts by his political adversaries to harass him. He praised the "climate of industrial stability." He felt that downtown problems were due to "selfish businessmen." The city's twelve-year effort to stop dumping untreated sewage into the Wabash and construct a disposal plant was being sabotaged, he said, by the stalling tactics of opposing lawyers. Gambling was "one thing I've been very militant about," but the policing of "private clubs" with their roulete wheels was the job of state authorities. Brothels were being constantly raided.

"Where there were a couple of hundred, there are two or three now," he said, "and I don't know of any that are operating as houses."

The fact is that Terre Haute long ago ceased being a "wide-open town" in the old-fashioned sense. The crime rate is not abnormal. When it rains, it takes the sewers a while to absorb the water—where there are sewers. But no grass grows on the streets, and since World War II a number of large new plants have made up for some of the precipitous loss of employment in the coal mines. Indiana State Teachers' College has mushroomed into the biggest industry of all. In 1959 eighty-five gambling operators in the metropolitan area purchased Federal wagering-tax stamps, thereby admitting that they were in a business which is illegal in Indiana. But there are no gambling dens jammed with tourists.

True, in 1957 it took United States Treasury agents to close down a bookmaking establishment taking in around $1,200,000 a month from bets telephoned by customers in forty-three states, Canada and Cuba. Zeppo Marx, bridge expert John R. Crawford and other well-known horseplayers were subpoenaed and testified as witnesses. Eight operators of the modest third-floor office above Wabash Avenue were convicted. They were out-of-towners, but as one local executive observed, "They didn't accidentally come to Terre Haute and say, 'This is a good corner.'"

My own impression was that Terre Haute sin is mostly casual and local. One intimate little club I visited was serving delicious-looking dinners for $2.50. The club's door was locked. I was with two newly found friends who had a "membership card," but we were admitted without showing it, and they assured me that anyone with a clean shirt could get in. The gambling room was behind an open door off the bar. When I looked in, there were no customers. Two stickmen looked up expectantly from their stations by the crap table. At our next stop there was no "action," perhaps because, as my friends pointed out, a well-known local official was having dinner there. In the third place a few dozen clients were quietly drinking in front, and another dozen or so were patronizing the roulette wheel behind an open door to the rear.

It was all very matter-of-fact, just like my call on the bookie parlor. This one was on the second floor of 832 Wabash Avenue, directly across the street from Tony Hulman's office. I found it because a few months previously it had been described by Joe H. Petty, manager of the local state employment office, in a letter to the Terre Haute *Star*, inquiring why the place was being permitted to operate.

"A casual visitor will find there a somewhat dingy but spacious room resembling a stockbroker's office," Petty wrote. "A loud-speaker is calling out the results of races at such places as Gulfstream, Lincoln Downs, Bowie, Oaklawn and Aqueduct. On boards are the lists of the horses in the various races."

Following publication of the letter, Petty had told me, he had been threatened with the possible loss of his job and other unpleasantness, so I decided to check whether the place was still in business. I found it just as he had described it. The loud-speaker was squawking, "Eight minutes' betting time for Chicago and Detroit." At one table seven men and two women were playing poker. Chips, bills and change were stacked in front of each. The sign on the wall said, WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE. LADIES PRESENT. My presence caused about as much stir as the arrival of a regular customer.

Later one change was made to discourage the curiosity of snoopy outsiders. The bookie parlor's door was locked, and there was a buzzer and a sign, MEMBERS ONLY. But a non-"member" I know had little difficulty entering and taking a look around. In the gambling rooms of the night clubs, Terre Haute friends of mine noted business-as-usual conditions as recently as last month.

My investigation of prostitution was, I admit, more cursory. Experts in the field of venereal-disease control have assured me that Terre Haute is one of perhaps a dozen communities of any size left in the country with "a line"—a well-defined red-light district. It is in the general area of Second and Cherry streets. Investigators of the American Social Health Association toured it a year ago, and I read their report. They found eleven brothels in operation and were themselves solicited in the most clinical language I've ever seen committed to paper.

Except for ministers, I found almost nobody in Terre Haute who thinks that what remains of the once vast gambling and prostitution matters at all. Ray Hahn, a bald highly personable shoe-store owner who was the 1959 Republican candidate against Mayor Tucker, didn't even mention it in his campaign. Hahn, fifty, had been one of the charter members of United Terre Haute, a reform movement sparked by the Junior Chamber of Commerce in 1954. It caused quite a stir. The governor spoke at the organizational meeting. Some seventy organizations decided to co-operate to make taxpayers aware of local problems. The project lasted a little over a year.

"After the election the thing disbanded," Hahn said. "Everybody just gave up. They couldn't get anybody to come to meetings."

Next, Hahn, who has seven children and used to be president of the school board, became the first anti-Hulman candidate for the presidency of the Chamber of Commerce. He won. It was he, along with John Lamb, who drafted Floyd Dix for the job that led to Dix's TV appearances. When this brought no action, Hahn decided to neglect his business and run for mayor. He talked about the sewage and the traffic and the soot, but nobody seemed much interested.

"I had no party support whatever because they felt I'd run the city like a business," he told me. "I would make no promises. Tucker operates on the theory that if he does nothing he will make fewer people angry. He's evidently satisfied most of the people most of the time. You can't place the blame on Tony Hulman. I like Tony. I don't think he wants things changed, but he's done more than anybody else."

Many substantial citizens cannot understand why Terre Haute can't—like Peoria, Illinois, for instance—shake its past. One of these men is Chapman Root, thirty-five, president of the Associated Coca-Cola Bottling Plants, Inc., and known during World War II as "the army's richest corporal." Root's father ran a Terre Haute glass company, and when the Coca-Cola company in 1913 asked industry to design a bottle, two of Root's employees came up with the winner. For fourteen years Root collected a five-cent royalty on every gross manufactured. He wound up with thirty-five bottling plants all over the country. His son, who remains a legal resident of Terre Haute but spends most of his time at his home in Ormond Beach, Florida, told me, "It just seems that the combination of things that are needed to put a town over, we haven't been able to put together. Why this is, I don't know. It's a mystery to me."

"It's the people," said Ray Hahn at his shoe store.

"The people want it that way," said retiring Republican Gov. Harold W. Handley at the capitol in Indianapolis. "Who am I to argue with them?"

"The ones who've always lived here think every other place is the same way," said Joe Petty at the Terre Haute employment office. "They sort of like it the way it is."

"We're a backward city," said Vern McMillan at his sporting-goods store. "We've gone straight down. It's a lack of leadership."

McMillan is well qualified on the subject. He was the Republican mayor from 1944 to 1948, when gambling and vice were shut down, and a fresh breeze blew through City Hall. A retired FBI official ran the police. Businessmen, doctors and lawyers headed other departments. Health-department appropriations, and policemen's and firemen's salaries were increased. Still, taxes were lowered and municipal finances were rehabilitated. But McMillan was helped by war prosperity and the Army's frowning on vice. And even his energy and success couldn't buck the tide of Terre Haute's history.

The founder was General—later President—William Henry Harrison. He picked a site near present-day Terre Haute in 1811 as a base for the nation's further expansion westward. The county was named for Francis Vigo, who financed William Rogers Clark. By mid-century, big money was being made. One Crawford Fairbanks accumulated $40,000,000 brewing beer, distilling liquor, trading in real estate and much else. Chauncey Rose, an oil wildcatter, railroad operator and financier, endowed the Grand Opera House and the Rose Polytechnic Institute. Population began doubling every decade. From Cincinnati, Francis Hulman wrote Tony Hulman's grandfather, Herman, in Germany asking him to join the family in a new wholesale grocery venture way out west in the "well-laid-out, flourishing and growing" city of Terre Haute.

"O, Herman! Herman! follow my advice," he wrote. "There is still time! You will lead an entirely different life, be a different person, a free man, independent."

Herman came. So did other businessmen, the miners, the madams, the labor organizers and the strikebreakers. Terre Haute's "District" became the most notorious vice spot in Indiana. Eugene V. Debs, a local boy with a mission, made his home town his headquarters. He built the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, led the Pullman strike and went to jail in 1918 for his "traitorous" antiwar speeches. In 1920, from his cell, he ran for president for the fifth time on the Socialist ticket and got more votes than any other Socialist before or since. About the same time, a Terre Haute mayor, Don Roberts, and others went to the penitentiary for stealing, among other things, an election.

Slowly, mining declined. Businesses started leaving town. Terre Haute became known as a focal spot of labor unrest.

Finally, on July 22, 1935, the great traumatic experience of the city's life erupted: the first general strike east of the Rockies. Armed gangs, Federal troops, chaos and panic stalked the streets. It seems like long ago. To those who remember, Terre Haute has come a long way. Unions remain strongly entrenched, but strikes are few. Thoughtful people, like John Lamb, Floyd Dix and Ray Hahn, know that their city has not come nearly far enough. But somewhere in its decades of violence and decline, Terre Haute's collective spirit cracked and apathy took its place.

"It's the people," Hahn said again. "Unless something affects them in dollars and cents, I don't think they're particularly interested. Some are, but there are not enough of them." THE END